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When the World Conference on Human Rights convenes in Vienna in June 1993, one of the main concerns will be the need to enhance United Nations technical cooperation programmes aimed at promoting and protecting human rights. Says Antoine Blanca, Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights and Secretary-General of the World Conference, "Only substantial assistance to individual countries in order to develop appropriate national infrastructures will sustain the action of Governments in favour of human rights."

Specifically, Mr. Blanca has suggested that the Conference consider setting two main targets to be achieved by the year 2000:

- universal ratification of the International Covenants on Human Rights and other basic human rights instruments; and
- attribution of at least 0.5 per cent of total development cooperation budgets to human rights programmes.

The need for greater financial resources reflects one of the main, ongoing problems confronting the United Nations in its efforts to cultivate respect for human rights. As one United Nations official says, "The whole field of human rights is not given the importance it deserves in the world's overall development cooperation." Among other things, the World Conference hopes to change this situation, winning renewed commitment to technical assistance in the process.

Why should the world look to the United Nations for technical assistance in the field of human rights? First and foremost, the Organization is deeply committed to the cause. In 1948, as one of its earliest undertakings, the United Nations drafted and issued the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the basic international pronouncement of the inalienable and inviolable rights of all members of the human family. The United Nations also has some unique comparative advantages: authoritative knowledge of how international human rights instruments work, decades of hands-on experience and, perhaps most essential, neutrality and objectivity.

All over the world, United Nations experts on human rights are sitting down with Government officials, police officers and judges to find ways to improve respect for human rights. The global endeavour is part of the United Nations Programme of Advisory Services and Technical Assistance in the field of human rights, an endeavour which dates back to 1955 but has greatly expanded since 1988 with the trend towards democracy in Latin America and the changes in Eastern and Central Europe. In 1991, the Centre for Human Rights, the programme's administrating body, received the largest number of requests for technical assistance in its history.

Technical assistance is usually offered in six areas:

- reforming national laws;
- advising on electoral procedures;
- assisting in the ratification of human rights treaties and preparation of national reports;
- supporting democratization;
- strengthening national and regional institutions; and
- training professionals in the administration of justice.

To these traditional concerns has been added a more recent emphasis on "preventive diplomacy" —the attempt to keep disputes from arising, escalating into conflict and spreading.

Among the nations currently benefiting from United Nations technical cooperation are: Mongolia and Romania, where advice has been offered about drafting new constitutions; Albania and Lesotho, where democratic elections have been the focus; and Bulgaria, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Paraguay, Poland and Uruguay, which are strengthening their human rights institutions.

The incorporation of international human rights norms into national law is a key element in protecting human rights. Nowhere is this more important than in the case of a nation's constitution—the supreme law of the land. Accordingly, the Centre for Human Rights has been very active in this area.

In December 1990, the Centre organized a seminar on human rights in constitutional law for members of Romania's Parliamentary Commission charged with drafting a new constitution. Two months later, the Centre dispatched experts to provide additional advice on the draft document, focusing on its human rights components.

HUMAN RIGHTS

UNITED NATIONS

Assistance on a new constitution was also provided to Bulgaria through a conference on human rights in constitutional and statutory development held in Sofia in January 1991. The meeting brought together international experts and members of the Bulgarian Grand National Assembly.

United Nations experts also went to Mongolia to meet with representatives of that country's Parliament assigned to draft a new constitution. Discussions held in June 1991 focused on all aspects of the draft, and in particular on clauses dealing with human rights from the viewpoint of international law. A final draft was submitted to the Mongolian Parliament in November 1991 and adopted in January 1992.

In an unprecedented initiative, the Centre convened a seminar on international human rights standards and constitutional law that featured the first discussion of constitutional issues among people representing a broad spectrum of South African society. The June 1991 debate in Geneva brought together ten international experts and 33 South African specialists involved in developing a constitution to replace the apartheid system. The participants focused on how to incorporate international human rights standards and provisions into the document.

Overall, says one Centre official, "the help in drafting constitutions has attained very good results. With a fairly cheap and short input, one can achieve constitutions that are sometimes even better than those of many Western countries. Countries have listened to the advice given".

Advising on electoral procedures

Advisory services on electoral procedures are provided at Government request. In April 1990, the Centre for Human Rights counseled Romania on the legal and technical aspects of democratic elections in connection with voting held there the following month. Since then the Centre has advised Romania on drafting legislation relating to electoral law as part of a "country programme" in human rights agreed to in 1991.

United Nations experts also visited Albania in March 1991 to provide assistance on the legal and technical aspects of the elections of 31 March 1991. After meeting with the Chairman of the Election Commission, the Chairman of the Computing Centre for the Elections, Government representatives and leaders of the major political parties, the experts provided the Albanian Government with observations and recommendations.

In November 1991, a United Nations team went to Lesotho to provide assistance on the legal and technical aspects of the elections scheduled for November 1992. Meetings were held with the King of Lesotho; the Minister of Law, Justice and Constitutional Affairs; the Chief Justice; and leaders of the 14 registered political parties. Extensive discussions also took place with the Ministry staff charged with drafting the electoral law and organizing the elections.

In these and other United Nations programmes focusing on electoral activities, one basic tool has been the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Most recently, the use of local-language versions of the document contributed to the democratic process in Nicaragua and Namibia, where elections were held in 1990, and in Haiti, where two rounds of voting occurred in late 1990 and early 1991.

Assisting in the ratification of treaties and preparation of national reports

The submission of periodic reports to the United Nations organs established by the conventions on human rights is one of the obligations that States parties must fulfil under the relevant treaty.

Assistance has been provided to the Government of Guinea through the advisory services of a United Nations human rights expert, who visited the country and had consultations with the national authorities responsible for preparing periodic reports under the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Regional and subregional training courses have been held in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific. In 1991, a national workshop was held in Moscow on the preparation of reports to UN human rights treaty bodies. In Iran, a national training course planned for August 1992 was to assist the Iranian authorities in preparing periodic reports to UN human rights bodies, in particular under the two International Covenants.

Supporting democratization

The process of democratization has been a prime focus of advisory services since 1988, when the Centre, reacting to events in Eastern and Central Europe, organized a human rights seminar in Moscow for the countries of the region—the first such seminar ever held. Assistance has been provided to several of these nations on holding elections, setting up national human rights institutions and drafting laws in line with human rights conventions.

Europe is not the only region to be experiencing the "outbreak" of democracy. Following the change of Government in Paraguay in early 1989, the Centre has been helping the new administration set up the proper infrastructure for promoting and protecting human rights. This project's main goals are to incorporate international human rights standards into the legal system and to set up a national human rights commission made up of Government representatives and those of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In addition, at the Government's request a human rights office has

been established within Paraguay's Ministry of Justice and Labour to serve as a focal point for human rights activities within the Government and for cooperation with NGOs. The Centre for Human Rights is also providing the country with consultants, lecturers, fellowships and documentation and is assisting in organizing workshops, training courses and a national information campaign.

Protecting human rights depends to a great extent on the adequacy and responsiveness of national institutions such as the courts and the administration. One programme in Uruguay is helping to set up a national infrastructure to promote human rights by hiring national human rights specialists, extending the reach of human rights education, bringing national laws in line with international provisions and organizing training courses for police, magistrates and prison officers. In 1991, Uruguay's Ministry of External Relations established a human rights unit responsible for carrying out the project and for coordinating overall human rights activities.

A country programme to strengthen institutions has been under way in Colombia since 1988, carried out by the Office of the Presidential Adviser for the Defence, Protection and Promotion of Human Rights. United Nations experts have assisted Colombian authorities in human rights education and in developing procedures relating to cases of involuntary or forced "disappearances". In addition, training courses have been organized for military personnel, judges, police and other law-enforcement officials.

The country programme for Guatemala, in operation since 1988, aims to strengthen institutions such as the Office of the Procurator for Human Rights and the Commission on Indigenous Communities of the Congress. Two United Nations experts are providing advisory services on human rights education and are assisting the Commission on Indigenous Communities in drafting laws. Training courses have been organized for administrators of justice, law enforcement officials and military officers.

Poland has been carrying out a programme designed to increase implementation of international human rights standards and to broaden participation of the public in human rights matters through wider dissemination of information on human rights and the training of administrators of justice. Begun in 1992 with the assistance of the Centre, the programme involves the collaboration of several national institutions, among them the Poznan Human Rights Centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Human Rights Institute of the Ministry of Justice, the Human Rights Chairs at Lublin and Torun Universities and the Human Rights Foundation of the Polish Helsinki Committee.

Human rights mechanisms at the regional level and regional institutions are also indispensable for protecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms. Since 1991, the Centre has been assisting the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in setting up the infrastructure that will allow the Commission to fulfil its protection and promotion activities. One particular focus has been the creation of a documentation centre as a storehouse of African national legislation and judicial decisions.

The African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies in Banjul, the Gambia, has developed a documentation and information centre for the region, provides training activities and disseminates information. UN assistance has included the provision of books and documentation and the financing of promotional activities.

Created in 1989, the Arab Institute of Human Rights in Tunis, Tunisia, has set up a documentation centre to promote human rights in the Arab world through training courses and the dissemination of information. UN assistance has enabled the Institute to develop its infrastructure, publish studies and periodicals, organize workshops and seminars and carry out research in several Arab countries, including studies on national legislation.

Training in the field of human rights includes seminars, courses, workshops, fellowships and scholarships. Since 1988, the United Nations has granted more than 200 fellowships and scholarships and organized about 30 training courses in all parts of the world involving some 2,500 administrators of justice. Among those held in 1991 were:

Brasilia, Brazil, 17-19 June: A national training course on the application of United Nations human rights mechanisms in the administration of justice, attended by Government representatives from 27 provinces and heads of military and police departments;

Moscow, 26-30 August: A workshop on international human rights instruments and reporting obligations, attended by officials from the Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, External Relations and Justice as well as NGO representatives;

Bucharest, Romania, 23-25 September: A seminar on international human rights standards for judges of the Supreme Court of Romania, attended by Supreme Court judges and prominent human rights experts who discussed the role of the judiciary in a democratic society; and

Similar initiatives in Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Chile, Egypt, France, Indonesia, Italy, Malta, Mongolia, Namibia, Paraguay, Portugal, Swaziland and Venezuela, as well as in Greenland and at the United Nations Office in Geneva.

The impact of training courses is difficult to quantify. However, it is

known that several African participants in past seminars were encouraged enough to have since become leading figures in the democratic development of their countries.

The expansion of technical cooperation activities may have far-reaching consequences. Antoine Blanca has called human rights the "foundation on which democracy and development have to rest". With such fundamental issues involved, technical assistance has the potential to become the Centre's main tool for preventive diplomacy. Indeed, in carrying out comprehensive country programmes, the Centre has a prominent role to play in helping Governments build their capacities for developing effective democratic systems and lasting human rights reforms and infrastructures.

The Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights was set up in 1987 and is administered by the Centre for Human Rights. As of 31 May 1992, resources amounted to $5.4 million, with contributions received from 23 nations (including four developing countries) and six NGOs. Expenditures in 1991 covered advisory services of experts, training courses and workshops, strengthening regional and national human rights institutions and seminars for introducing human rights in newly democratized countries.

Requests for technical cooperation continue to pour in to the Centre. Thailand intends to develop a bureau of civil rights protection in the Office of the Procurator General. Mauritania has plans to adapt its legislation to the provisions of United Nations human rights instruments. The Philippines has requested assistance to train human rights investigators. Russia has indicated a need for advisory services to reform its judicial system. Other countries that have contacted the Centre for similar reasons have included Ecuador, Latvia, Kyrgyzstan, Sao Tome and Principe and Turkey.

But to achieve its goals, technical assistance needs adequate funding. Says Mr. Blanca: "Only a serious commitment by the international community to assist and cooperate in the development of human rights, in addition to strengthening the machinery of implementation, could give the World Conference the opportunity to succeed in its aims."

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